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Posted Online: July 12, 2004

The water distribution system for Kankakee, Aroma Park, Bradley and Bourbonnais will remain prone to water outages for years to come as water mains continue aging, and water storage capacity remains inadequate.

The 80-year-old water main which burst Monday is the jugular vein to the metropolitan water distribution system, and isn't scheduled for replacement until 2005. The next water storage tower construction project slated for 2006 will still leave the system about one-third short of ideal storage capacity.

"The infrastructure is all World War II vintage," said Aqua Illinois General Manager Tom Bunosky. "You can't just catch up in one year."

Aqua Illinois just started upgrading the outdated water distribution system in 2000. The upgrades -- funded through two consecutive water rate increases -- included construction of two new water storage towers, and increases in capacity at existing water storage facilities.

The system ideally needs 18 million gallons of storage capacity to avoid outages. Water storage is needed to keep water flowing when water mains break until repairs are completed.

The current system has about 9 million gallons of storage capacity. New projects slated for 2003 and 2006 together will add 3 million gallons in capacity, which still leaves the system about 6 million gallons short.

Bunosky acknowledged that the shortfall remains beyond the scope of current company plans, and couldn't understand himself why the company waited until 2000 to start upgrading the system.


"It was a rate avoidance issue, and not making investments in the system was the philosophy," said Bunosky. "Why that management philosophy was here in previous years, I cannot answer that."



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Residents are paying almost \$10 per month more on their average water bill than in 2000 to fund the upgrades. Increases of \$3.63 in 2001 and \$6.05 in 2004 are paying for the upgrades, but the upgrades will still take time even with the influx of cash, according to Bunosky.

The system -- like many other systems across the country -- is simply getting old.

"This is a national problem, it is not unique to us," said Bunosky. "There are tremendous estimates for the amount of money to upgrade the system."

The water main which burst Monday connects the water treatment plant on Cobb Boulevard to the entire metropolitan water distribution system.

The same main burst once seven years ago, but other large mains have gotten higher priority on the replacement list for causing more persistent problems, according to Bunosky. Turning the pressure back on Monday evening carried the risk of causing other bursts throughout older portions of the system.

Perhaps the best answer as to why Monday's water main burst occurred is simply old age.

"How and why it broke? It's anyone's guess," said Bunosky. "There was nothing unusual happening at the time the break occurred."



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